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Shotgun Review

Galleons and Globalization: California Mission Arts and the Pacific Rim

By John Zarobell

September 11, 2010

On the surface, *Galleons and Globalization: California Mission Arts and the Pacific Rim* appears to be a hugely ambitious show. This expansive survey of California Mission Art and related objects from Asia incorporates 150 works—including paintings, sculptures, textiles, maps, and decorative art objects—that were produced on three continents and date from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It is further complemented by another exhibition of missionary books presented in the Donohue Rare Book Room at University of San Francisco. Nevertheless, the show articulates a fundamentally simple premise: “Think Globally, Act Locally.” Fr. Thomas Lucas S.J., who painstakingly assembled *Galleons and Globalization* has provided not only a window into the world of California Mission Arts. He has successfully demonstrated how much, and for how long, California was a crossroads for arts and culture throughout the Pacific Rim.

Despite the fact that much of the ecclesiastical imagery manifested in these works draws from European precedents, these objects tell a story of cultural mixing. There are exchanges of images visible here and further evidence of adapting and transforming art-making techniques into a variety of new contexts, from Peru to the Philippines to Alta California.

Take, for example, the work titled simply *Chumash Tabernacle*, which demonstrates how native craftsmen were deployed to make objects of Catholic devotion. While such an object does not appear in the history books, its beauty and originality are clear. The use of abalone signifies that the work was made locally, and that the anonymous Chumash craftsman who created the tabernacle was clearly aware of the material’s decorative potential prior to his contact with



Unknown. Chumash Tabernacle; c. 1790, wood, mirror, and abalone shell, collection of the Mission Santa Barbara. Courtesy of the Thacher Gallery, University of San Francisco.

the Europeans. In this object of devotion, the artist adapted abalone inlay to emulate a lacquer technique developed much earlier in China and Japan. Further, he employed abalone in combination with mirrors, a material common in Europe during this period. That an indigenous North American produced this dazzling cultural mash-up testifies to the complexity of culture in colonial California.

The interpretation of material culture can tell us highly complex histories if we begin to understand how to read the images, techniques, and means of production in these works of art that have survived the ravages of time. Without sacrificing aesthetic quality, this exhibition works to illuminate what stories are embedded in these cherished objects.

“Galleons and Globalization: California Mission Arts and the Pacific Rim” is on view at the Thacher Gallery of the University of San Francisco through December 19, 2010.

Comments Show

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